

## Notes on mirror visions in 'Modesty Blaise'

Article (Published Version)

Grant, Catherine (2013) Notes on mirror visions in 'Modesty Blaise'. *La Furia Umana* (17). ISSN 2255-2812

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/46758/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.



LA  
FURIA

UMANA

I'm not like everybody else  
The Kinks  
E che, sono forse al mondo per  
realizzare delle idee?  
Max Stirner  
(No ideas but in things)  
W.C. Williams

MENU

YOU ARE HERE: / [HOME \(/\)](#) / [ARCHIVE \(/INDEX.PHP/30-ARCHIVE\)](#) / [LFU/17 \(/INDEX.PHP/29-ARCHIVE/LFU-17\)](#)  
/ CATHERINE GRANT / NOTES ON MIRROR VISIONS IN "MODESTY BLAISE"

# CATHERINE GRANT / Notes on Mirror Visions in "Modesty Blaise"

[\\_ \(https://vimeo.com/68515202\)](https://vimeo.com/68515202)



A familiar signature of Losey’s style in many of his films is the elaborate use of mirrors. [James Palmer and Michael Riley, *The Films of Joseph Losey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51]

For Losey, shooting with mirrors (something that cinematographers generally tend to avoid) was to become something of a fetish. [Amy Sargeant, *The Servant* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2011), 20]



[*Modesty Blaise*] seems marred only by the very stylistic quality that makes it go -- its excessiveness. [...] What is missing from the film is a sense of restraint. And in this day and time, perhaps we have no right to expect it. [James Michael Martin, 'Modesty Blaise by Joseph Losey', *Film Quarterly*, 20:4, Summer 1967, 63-65, 65]

I think that Losey here worked as a poet works [Raymond Durgnat, 'Symbols and *Modesty Blaise*', *Cinema*, No. 1, December 1968]

*Modesty Blaise* (Joseph Losey, 1966) travels the cinematic distance between an opening shot of the seemingly contented sleeping face of its star Monica Vitti and an extreme close-up of her eponymous character's over-stimulated, rapacious look directly at the camera in the film's final frames. This is a deceptively simple journey, perhaps. But, while making it, what she and certainly *we* do with our eyes repeatedly involves mirrors, as is so often the case in Losey's looking-glass cinema. What Losey and his cinematographer Jack Hildyard achieve with reflective surfaces in this pop and op art spy film, a 'remediation' of Peter O'Donnell's much loved comic strip (1963-1986), however, has not been nearly as well received as the director's earlier signature experiments with those forms, for example in *The Servant* (1963), or in *Eve* (1962), another of his 'cosmopolitan' films. In the latter work, locations in Venice afforded him the challenge of photographing, for the first time, 'reflected surfaces: mirrors – one of his most cherished symbols – and water, in baths, fountains, canals and the sea' [Edith de Rham, *Joseph Losey* (London: André Deutsch, 1991), p. 133]. Are *Modesty Blaise*'s multiple mirrorings a symptom of unrestrained and muddled fetishism, or, integral to what Durgnat takes as Losey's film poetry? The following notes, and an accompanying video essay (<https://vimeo.com/68515202>), offer some specular reflections.

## I. Little Spies in Amsterdam

Losey loved mirrors because [aided by them] he could watch people without them knowing his eye was upon them. [De Rham, *op. cit.*, 133-4]

Many of *Modesty Blaise*'s early scenes are set in Amsterdam. They take full advantage, for Losey's mirror-vision preoccupations, of some of that city's similarities with the Venice of *Eve*, as well as with other (amphibious) cities: the usual inside/outside reflective

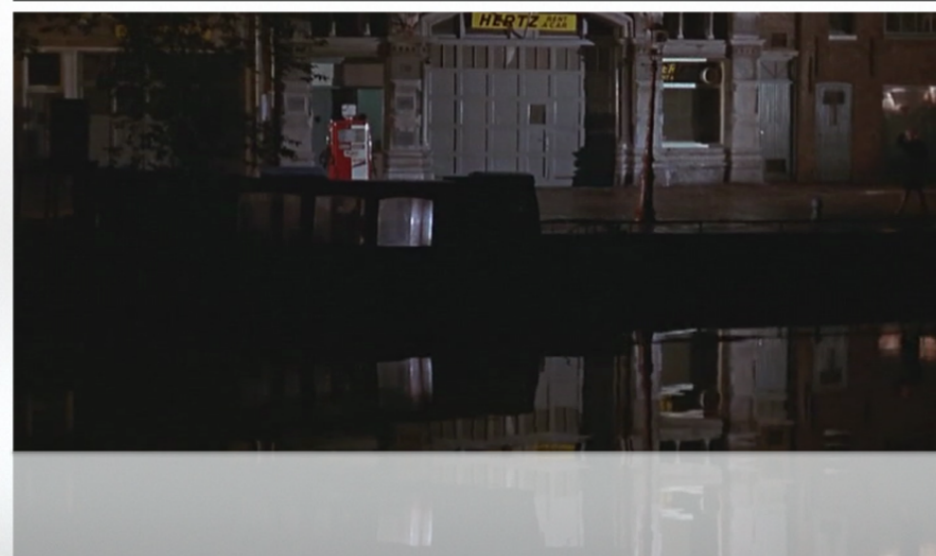
liminalities of urban windows; and, more specifically, canals and their inverted and fragmented views of what lies above them.



But an even more *sui generis* aspect of Amsterdam's historic centre, at the time of *Modesty Blaise*'s shooting, must have opened up to Losey further expressive possibilities for a film about espionage - that is to say, the Dutch tradition of rear-view mirrors mounted next to the outside of windows in order to monitor street-level comings and goings, with small ones known frequently as *spionnetjes*, or 'little spies'.

Take, for example, a sequence in the early part of the film: the nightclub magician character Pacco (Aldo Silvain) is reflected in a brothel spy mirror while he sits inside, in the usual place of a prostitute, in the window. There is so much going on out in the street, in the main part of the film frame, that Pacco doesn't particularly attract our attention. Seconds later, we see him come out onto the street, spied on from the next doorway by one of the film's





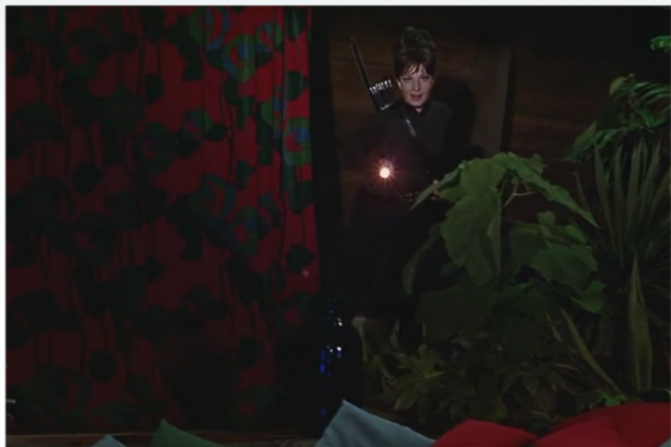
villains. This is the first of several ‘sleight of hand’, or vanishing/appearing, tricks played with these and other mirrors in the film.



In a later scene, which also takes place in the red-light district, Vitti's character Modesty disguises herself and hides in plain sight after she dives into a brothel to escape her pursuers. The little mirror on the window frame allows her to see when it's safe to leave.

Interestingly, some seventeen minutes *earlier* in the film, a photograph of Modesty in the same costume in the same window is fleetingly shown as part of a magazine spread (seemingly with Vitti as its topic) that she finds in the Amsterdam apartment of her sometimes lover, British spy Paul Hagan (Michael Craig). The magazine is tucked under a copy of Peter O'Donnell's comic strip (the text very loosely adapted for this film by Losey and his scriptwriter Evan Jones). This iconographic recursiveness is pursued, possibly over the edge into iconoclasm (perhaps one of the reasons for the film's poor reception among fans of the original strip), when later in the same sequence Modesty mutates into her comic book version, ready for some aggressive sexual play with Hagan.





The voyeuristic possibilities of mirrors continue to be explored in the film in scenes that combine inside/outside window aesthetics, little mirrors *and* reflective canal imagery.





Especially in its first half, in which Losey's film makes very fruitful thematic use of its locations, *Modesty Blaise* revels in the excessive glassiness of its surveillance society setting. Indeed, it is largely through its hyperbolic configuration of mirrors and reflective



surfaces that the film composes its scopophilic domain: a *SuperSpy* film indeed. Scenes refracted, in part, through mirrors, as in the early sequence in which Modesty's trusty sidekick Willie Garvin (Terence Stamp) is interrupted by her phone call while he makes love (note also the appearance of a framed reproduction of Jim Holdaway's artwork for O'Donnell's *Modesty Blaise*) are key to the film's patina of 1960s sexiness, even when Amsterdam's red-light district is not in the picture.



## II. Signatorial Reflections

[Shooting *Eve* in Venice] made visually specific all my preoccupations with mirror vision, left-handedness, sexual reversals, the fragmentation of water. [Joseph Losey cited in Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 217]

Oblique mirrors, concave and convex mirrors and Venetian mirrors are inseparable from a circuit, as can be seen [...] in Losey, especially in *Eve* and *The Servant*. This circuit itself is an exchange: the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror

catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field. [Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 68]

We are left with an endlessly reverberating series of mirror images where we ultimately lose track of what is virtual and what is actual. [Colin Gardner, 'From Mimicry to Mockery: Cold War Hybridity in Evan Jones's *The Damned*, *Modesty Blaise* and *Funeral in Berlin*', *Media History*, 12:2, 2006: 177-191, 186]

Optical Art is a method of painting concerning the interaction between illusion and picture plane, between understanding and seeing. [John Lancaster, *Introducing Op Art*, (London: BT Batsford Ltd, 1973), 28]

While the potential for voyeurism afforded by mirrors forms part of a signature theme for Losey, their reflectiveness also plays a significant perceptual role, one central to *Modesty Blaise*'s singular 'flamboyant op art' epistemology [Joseph Losey, in *Losey on Losey*, ed. Tom Milne (London: BFI/ Secker and Warburg, 1967), 63.]. In particular, a number of the film's moving shots of mirror visions produce troubling effects of ambiguous doubling, uncanniness, déjà vu, distortion and downright deception. There is, in other words, a distinct pattern of *trompe l'oeil*, misdirection and 'sleight of hand' effects forged through mirror images in the film, which exceeds the presence of a magician character in the film's narrative.

On one or two key occasions, these effects produce what Gilles Deleuze in his theory of the 'crystal-image' has called a fleeting 'point of indiscernibility [...] precisely constituted by [...] the coalescence of the actual image and the virtual image, the image with two sides, actual and virtual at the same time.' [Deleuze, *op. cit.*, 67].

These moments in the café playfully but unsettlingly puncture our experience of filmic





space and continuity. And they provoke further questions, too: what is it that Modesty sees in her compact mirror? A reflection (and a magnified close up) of what lies behind her? Or, a bizarre surveillance film of some kind?

Exaggerated tricks involving reflections and reframings like these seem to rhyme with the





film's broader visual play on the crossing of perceptual thresholds. One of the most obvious examples of this is the film's rapidly shuttling shot of a ship's propeller above and below the waterline - a bizarre, and otherwise unmotivated, to-and-fro action that serves, above all, to remind the spectator that someone must be calling these baroque shots.

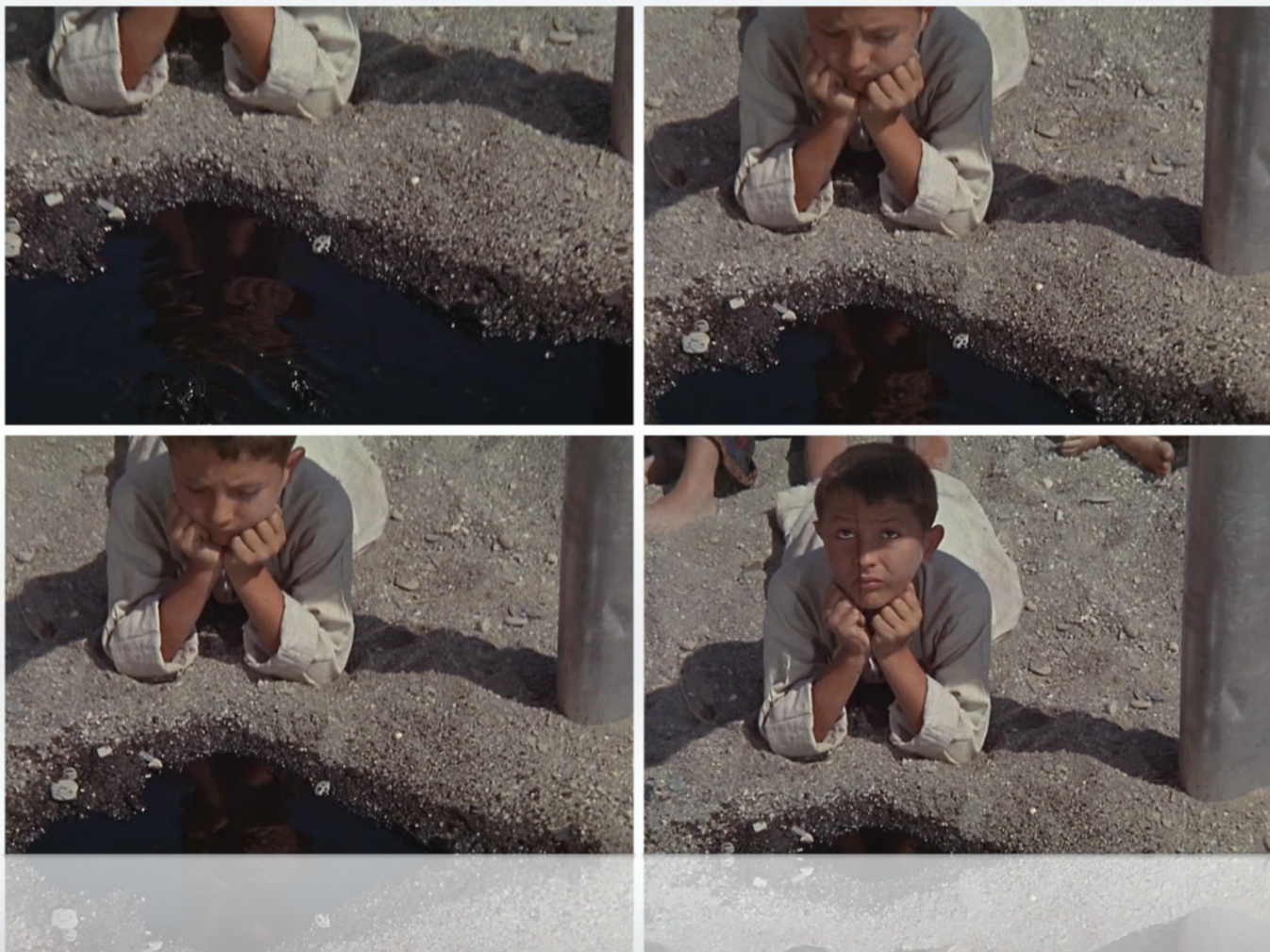




### III. Anamorphosis?

What's a great mannerist? It's someone who works relentlessly to a certain kind of *anamorphosis*, with an intimate knowledge of the image, of the face from which he started. [Serge Daney, interviewed by Philippe Roger, 'Le Passeur', in *Devant la recrudescence des vols des sacs à main* (Lyons: Aléas, 1991). Translated by Laurent Kretzschmar, 'Mannerism', *Serge Daney in English*. Online at <http://sergedaney.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/mannerism.html> (<http://sergedaney.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/mannerism.html>)]

Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film. Excess forms no specific patterns which we could say are characteristic of the work. But the formal organization provided by style does not exhaust the material of the filmic techniques, and a spectator's attention to style might well lead to a noticing of excess as well. [Kristin Thompson, 'The Concept of Cinematic Excess', in: *Cine-*



Tracts, 1:2 (summer 1977): 54-65, 55-6. Online at  
 <<http://library.brown.edu/cds/cinetracts/CT02.pdf#page=58>  
 (.<http://library.brown.edu/cds/cinetracts/CT02.pdf#page=58>).>]

In the final scene of *Modesty Blaise*, there are a few last plays on actual/virtual images, surfaces and depth, and mirror visions. The film cuts to a close up of a small dark pool – a puddle of crude oil in the desert, it is revealed, as the camera pulls first up and then back. Reflections on its surface are distorted by what seems at first to be a slight bubbling up of air, but is in fact liquid dripping down. As the shot expands its scope, we see a boy looking down at the pool, towards his reflection, before his gaze turns upwards where it remains, surveying the pipe from which the oil drips. A humorous subversion of the Narcissus myth, this boy is not in thrall to his own image, refracted or muddied as it is by the stuttering flow of dark liquid. He can direct his gaze at the real virtual prize - oil. And Modesty can direct her aim, too, in the film's final shots, when she is given the choice of 'anything' as a reward for her virtuosic efforts in the film plot. She greedily requests a suitably crystalline one: the Sheikh's diamonds ('Ice is Nice' as Bob Breen sings in Johnnie Dankworth's closing music for this scene and the film's credits). Unhinged, maniacally laughing, she fixes her look at the film camera in a direct address mediated only by the glass lens and the sparkling, watery reflectiveness of her eyes.





The realities and virtualities of commodity fetishism (Losey's originary image for his anamorphosis, perhaps) are thus hidden in plain sight, a gesture typical of this film which relentlessly occupies the threshold between surface and depth, between actuality and reflection, between 'style' and 'excess', and between Losey's neat auteurist signature and his more baroque *autograph*.

*[For a short video essay (<https://vimeo.com/68515202>) made to accompany to the above written notes and images please go to: <https://vimeo.com/68515202> (<https://vimeo.com/68515202>)]*

*Catherine Grant*